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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

23 February 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Reactions to ROK Participation in the Indochina War

1. In compliance with the request of the NSC Planning Planning Board, there follows the Board of National Estimates assessment of Communist and non-Communist reactions to the commitment of ROK forces against the Viet Minh. The views here expressed have not been coordinated with the IAC agencies.

2. Whether or not the commitment of ROK forces to the war in Indochina would in fact require US logistic support, world opinion would almost certainly and with virtual unanimity consider that the operation had been supported and encouraged by the US.

I. THE REACTIONS OF FRANCE AND THE ASSOCIATED STATES

3. The French have been opposed to the introduction of any combat forces from outside the French Union. Thus, the commitment of ROK forces in Indochina would be regarded by the French as a major blow to French prestige. In addition, the use of

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South Korean troops in Indochina would be regarded in France as introducing a new ally with aims of its own, thus changing the nature of the war, and so altering the present political circumstances of the conflict as to eliminate any prospects for an early negotiated settlement of the Indochina problem. The French would be particularly sensitive on this score in the light of the forthcoming Geneva Conference.

4. We have estimated that French policy toward the Indochina war currently envisages improvement of the military situation only to the point of allowing France to negotiate with the Communists from a strengthened position.* The French probably would consider that the proposed ROK force could not decisively change the military situation. Moreover, the French probably believe that if sufficient ROK - or other foreign - forces were employed to improve the situation significantly, Communist China would increase its support of the Viet Minh, possibly up to the point of entering the conflict overtly and in force.

5. We believe, therefore, that France would oppose the commitment of ROK troops in Indochina. Moreover, we believe the US could obtain French consent to this commitment only by exerting

* NIE-63/1, "Probable Short-term Developments in French Policy", 1 December 1953; NIE-99, "Estimate of the World Situation Through 1955", 23 October 1953.

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such pressure as would damage US-French relations with respect to many important issues of common concern.

6. The introduction of ROK forces in the Indochina war would be regarded with mixed feelings in Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. Some strongly nationalist officials and a segment of public opinion in each of the states would probably welcome increased military assistance from whatever source. However, we believe that official and unofficial sentiment would be preponderantly against the ROK commitment. Opposition to the ROK commitment would probably be based in part on fear of possible Chinese Communist intervention. There would also be widespread feeling that the commitment of ROK forces represented a lack of confidence on the part of France and the US in the Associated States, that military aid which should be given to the forces of the Associated States was being diverted to foreign Asian troops, and that there would be less opportunity to extract political concessions from the French than if the Associated States themselves were making the increased war effort. We therefore believe that none of the States would willingly agree to the commitment of ROK forces in Indochina. If France permitted the ROK forces to join the conflict, the Associated States, regardless of their own feelings, would have to go along. However, if the ROK forces were committed in the face of the objections of

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the Associated States, there would be even less popular inclination than now exists to resist the Viet Minh.

II. REACTIONS OF OTHER NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

A. Asia

7. Reactions to the commitment of ROK forces in Indochina would be adverse in most of Asia, and in some countries strongly so.

8. This adverse reaction would be based in large measure on existing non-Communist attitudes toward the Indochina war, the present ROK government, and the concept of collective action against communism.

a. Although the close relationship between the Viet Minh and the international Communist movement is generally recognized in Asia, there is also a widespread belief that the Indochina war is primarily a struggle between indigenous nationalism and French colonialism. This ambivalence strengthens neutralist sentiment in countries such as India, and weakens support of Western policies toward Indochina even in such anti-Communist countries as Japan and Thailand.

b. Most Asian governments and most leaders of Asian public opinion are not prepared at present to

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participate in collective action against Communism. This reluctance would apply particularly to any action in which President Rhee had a leading part, for most non-Communist Asia has a great distrust of Rhee and fears that he desires to provoke World War III in order to obtain his objectives in Korea.

9. The commitment of ROK troops to Indochina would increase existing suspicions of Rhee. Many Asians would believe that Rhee was attempting to establish himself as a leader of an Asian anti-Communist bloc with US support. Asian nationalists and neutralists would be especially critical of the US for supporting Rhee, and would consider the ROK troops as US mercenaries. These criticisms of Rhee and the US would be greatly intensified if the ROK forces were not enthusiastically greeted and supported by the Associated States themselves.

10. In addition, there would probably be a general belief in non-Communist Asia that the commitment of ROK forces in would not inflict a decisive defeat on the Viet Minh and that the ROK action might result in Chinese Communist intervention and thus risk precipitating general war in Asia.

B. The UK

11. The UK would almost certainly oppose the intro-

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duction of ROK forces into Indochina.

a. The British would be concerned that such a move would lead to increased Chinese Communist activity and possibly to full-scale Chinese participation in Indochina with a consequent expansion of hostilities in Southeast Asia. British interest in Malaya and Hong Kong tends to make London especially apprehensive of widening the conflict in this area.

b. The British have a profound distrust of Rhee and the ROK. Any reservations London would have with respect to bringing "foreign" troops into Indochina would therefore be magnified in the case of ROK forces.

c. The British would also fear that whatever prospect there may be for settling Far East questions at the forthcoming Geneva Conference would be jeopardized if ROK troops were committed in Indochina.

12. Although ROK forces could be committed in Indochina without British consent, such a commitment in the face of strong British disapproval would seriously strain US-UK relations in general, and would make it more difficult for the US and UK to reach agreement on Asian questions.

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C. Other Non-Communist Countries

13. The reaction of most other important non-Communist countries to the commitment of ROK forces in Indochina would be adverse.

III. COMMUNIST REACTIONS

14. The Communists would consider the commitment of ROK forces to Indochina as essentially a US rather than a ROK undertaking. However, they would almost certainly estimate that these ROK forces could not make an early decisive difference in the Indochina war. Moreover, they would almost certainly estimate that considerable political advantage could be gained from exploiting the unpopularity of the US-ROK action. We therefore believe that the Communists would initially not commit Chinese Communist forces to an invasion of Indochina or renew hostilities in Korea. Chinese Communist assistance to the Viet Minh would be increased if necessary, but this aid would continue to be limited to logistic and rear area support. Meanwhile, they would exploit any differences over the commitment of ROK forces that would probably arise among the US and other non-Communist countries, and, in particular, would make propaganda attacks on the US for jeopardizing the success of the Geneva Conference.

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15. However, the Communists would be concerned that this commitment of ROK forces was only a prelude to more extensive outside intervention. Therefore, while undertaking the interim courses of action discussed above, the Communists would observe carefully the effectiveness of ROK troops in Indochina and would watch for any signs that the ROK or any other powers were planning to commit more forces.

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